

Ombudsman gets money for bush travel

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The State Ombudsman Office, set up by Governor Hammond in 1975 to investigate citizen complaints about state government, now has money for bush travel and will begin visiting many rural communities this month.

Joanne Harvey, assistant to the Ombudsman in the main Anchorage office, was in Fairbanks for three days last week receiving complaints from area residents. She reported that although not many complaints by native people or about native problems are received on her Fairbanks trips, the Ombudsman's staff does take in quite a few from around the state during the course of a year.

Still, the staff has not been satisfied with the number of complaints from the bush areas and attributes this to a limited budget which has restricted travel to outlying areas in the past. This year, that budget has been enlarged, and it is hoped that now more bush complaints will be received and investigated.

Although there are no statistics defining specifically native complaints, Harvey did say that records are compiled on a geographic basis which gives an idea of how many complaints are heard from the bush. She reports that from July to December, 1975, the Ombudsman Office filed 520 complaints, 67 of which were from bush locations.

Generally, those gripes are about housing and directed to the Alaska State Housing Authority (ASHA); village contracting problems with state agencies for such things as airport construction; longevity bonus payments; subsistence rights; and public assistance

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complaints (food stamps, medical benefits, etc.). She reports that in the case of ASHA, the number of complaints is steadily increasing.

In contrast, complaints in a city such as Fairbanks are generally more of the same that are heard in all populous areas—labor problems, residency cards, practices of the Manpower office, and some university complaints.

When the Ombudsman Office receives a complaint, it first talks to other witnesses and collects more background information on the problem. Then the agency concerned is contacted and asked what is going on and what can be done. Harvey said it is often a communications problem as in most subsistence hunting and fishing disputes, and that usually the biggest obstacle for the citizen is getting to the person who can really answer the questions that need answering.

Very often it is a matter of getting an agency to comply with its own procedures. If it remains uncooperative, the Ombudsman Office might turn to the media to make the agency feel uncomfortable, or will make a formal recommendation to the commissioner of the department under which the agency falls. Occasionally, an appeal is made to the governor.

When asked how often the office has to go to the commissioners, Harvey laughs and says, "We're getting to know them quite well."

Hawaii also has an ombudsman office, but Alaska, with fewer people, still submits more complaints than the island state which makes Joanne Harvey feel that the office is comparatively well utilized. She also feels that the reception from agencies is good and that most respect and take seriously Ombudsman recommendations.

The staff has been recently enlarged with a Juneau assistant, an Anchorage assistant, a secretary, the Deputy Ombudsman, Paddy Moriarty, and Ombudsman Frank Flavin.

Although all staff members are familiar with all state agencies and procedures, each has their own area of expertise. Flavin is particularly good with native problems largely due to his previous work with Alaska Legal Services.

The Ombudsman is the only lawyer on the staff and Harvey says that's the way he would like it to remain since it is felt that attorneys often have a way of looking at things that is more complicated and that makes it more difficult in relating to people.

Also, the Ombudsman Office is not allowed to give out legal advice, a temptation for any lawyer. Harvey said that the only people who really get upset with the Office are those seeking

legal advice who find out it cannot be given.

On their new bush travel schedule, the Office of the Ombudsman has made one round of communities in Southeast and has taken complaints in Ft. Yukon. Other rural areas on the schedule this month are Dillingham on the 16th-17th, Bethel on 19th and 20th, Nome on the 23, 24 and 25th, Kotzebue on the 26th-27th,

and Kodiak at the end of the month. Trips to Barrow, the Aleutians and possible charters to villages are planned.

Arrival of the Ombudsman representative will be publicized over local radio, television and in newspapers as well as posted in public places. The State Ombudsman Office will also take complaints by phone and can be called in Anchorage at 274-4011 from any place in the

state. Their address in Anchorage is 360 K Street, Room 360.